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LIBERTY THE CLOKE OF MALICIOUSNESS,

BOTH IN

THE AMERICAN REBELLION,

AND IN

THE MANNERS OF THE TIMES.

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S E R M O N

Preached at OLD ABERDEEN, *February 26. 1778,*

Being the FAST-DAY appointed by Proclamation,
on account of the Rebellion in *AMERICA.*

BY

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I PETER II. 16.

*As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of
maliciousness, but as the servants of God.*

THE duties to which we are this day called, are principally two; to implore the blessing of God on the counsels and the arms of our sovereign and our country, for putting an happy end to the civil war in which we are involved; and to humble ourselves in sincere repentance for those sins by which we have provoked God to visit us with this calamity, and which, persisted in, may justly provoke him to prolong it, or to blast our success and our national prosperity. In both these duties we may be animated and directed, by due consideration of the words now read.

THE apostle having inculcated on Christians submission to the civil government under which they lived; and, though it was a very exception-

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able form, being the government of the Roman emperours, and that too chiefly as it was exercised over the provinces, having represented that submission as a duty of sacred obligation, as incumbent *for the Lord's sake*, and required by *the will of God*; he adds, *As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God*. He acknowledges that they were free in many important respects; but he intimates that a licence wantonly to oppose established government, is no part of that liberty which the gospel either bestows or tolerates: he permits them to enjoy and rejoice in every degree of true liberty which the government allowed them; but he warns them, that under the false colour of enjoying and using it, they might very readily run into *maliciousness*, into bad practices of many kinds, and, by the plausible pretence of these being implied in the lawful exercise of their liberty, might deceive both themselves and others into an insensibility of their baseness, perhaps into an admiration of them as great and worthy. He points out their danger, not to excuse their misconduct by the difficulty of avoiding it, but on the contrary to make them the more careful to avoid it;

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for he assures them that what is in any degree wrong cannot be justified by its being disguised under the *cloke of liberty*, that it is inconsistent with their being *the servants of God*, a right to disobey whom liberty cannot possibly include, who expressly requires Christians to be subject to their governours, and who will call them to an account for the manner in which they use their liberty, as well as for every other part of their behaviour.

If now, my brethren, that opposition to the government of Britain, which its colonies have raised, comes under the description of what Peter expressly forbids, if it has been raised under a *false pretence* of enjoying and defending their *liberty*, and if it has led them into conduct which may justly be called *maliciousness*, we may with humble faith and trust implore the blessing of God on our righteous cause: And if many of the vices which stain our national character, and infect the hearts and pervert the ways of individuals, spring from our indulging ourselves in what is wrong, under the colour of liberty, we may, by considering them in their source, be excited to and directed in our repentance for them. That both these suppositions are founded in truth, it shall be my business to evince.

I. I SHALL show that the opposition of the colonies to the government of Britain has been raised under a false pretence of liberty, and has proceeded to maliciousness. I shall not enter minutely into all the reasonings which might be used for the full proof of this, nor into an examination of all the exceptions which have been adopted in order to elude their force; I shall only suggest some of those principles and maxims, which may be clearly established, and which lead directly to the conclusion.

THE world is not yet so degenerate that men can carry on what is wrong, avowedly as being wrong; all except the most abandoned must, for their own peace of mind, disguise it to themselves; and, for obtaining the support or even avoiding the detestation of others, all must veil it to the world, under the cloke of what is right, or innocent at least. We can never safely form our judgment of the designs and the conduct of men, by the representation which themselves give of them: the brighter the varnish which they endeavour to throw over them, the blacker in reality generally are bad designs and vicious actions.

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Any thing that is good, may, by the self-deceit and artifice of men, be perverted into a cover for evil practices: but there is a singular danger of liberty being abused into a mask for all the degrees of undutiful behaviour towards governours. The very conception of liberty naturally warms the heart, makes a strong impression on the spirit, and produces vigorous efforts to repell whatever we regard as an encroachment on it: and it is too ready to lead us to mistake the justest restraints for encroachments. If its true nature and its real extent be in any measure misunderstood, it inevitably pushes men into misconduct; and that with the greater force, on account of the ardor which it kindles in the breast, and which always burns strongest in the most generous natures.

A SUPPOSED encroachment on their liberty, is confessedly the motive to the defection of the colonies; and this encroachment lies precisely in their being taxed by the British parliament without their own consent. The plea, that to be taxed without their own consent, is simply and in itself to be in slavery, depends on this general principle,
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That liberty consists in mens being governed only by laws made by themselves or with their own consent. This description of liberty has been given by some of the greatest of our countrymen, and under the sanction of their names has been implicitly received, and with the generality has past into an axiom. But it is a description, from which it might easily be proved to follow, That the best possible form of government may be inconsistent with liberty, That the very worst form may be consistent with liberty, That there never was one free government in the world, That if a free government were formed, it could not be transmitted beyond that generation which formed it, That liberty cannot subsist in any society, except every individual belonging to it have a share in the legislature, Nor subsist a moment longer than all their resolutions are unanimous. A conception of liberty fraught with consequences so absurd, yet demonstrably deducible from it *,

* I have often examined the connexion between all these consequences and the commonly received description of liberty, with the most scrupulous attention of which I am capable : but a full eviſtion of it would have been improper in a *ſermon* : it is a ſubject much fitter for a *treatiſe*.

must needs be false; and when it is prevalent, it is certainly of importance that it be exploded. That every person should be governed only by his own consent, is inconsistent with every possible form of government; it is, in its strictest sense, inconsistent even with the independence of a nation of savages.

LIBERTY cannot exist in any society without restraints; were there but two persons within reach of one another, the one could not enjoy liberty, if the other were under no restraint. Liberty consists only in the power of doing what we ought, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not. Wherever laws require only what is right, and forbid only what is wrong, there is liberty, by whomsoever the laws be made. Wherever the form of government gives security for such laws, it gives proportionable security for liberty. It is our happiness to live under a government which gives the greatest security for this: but our security arises not immediately, but only remotely, from part of the legislature being chosen by the people: the circumstance from which it *immediately* arises, is, that the legislature have the same interest with the body of the people; and
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this circumstance gives the very same security to those who have no voice in choosing them, as to those who have.

Laws imposing taxes, stand on no different ground from other laws. Taxes proportioned to the real ends of good government, are as necessary as government itself. They are not a *free gift* of the people, which they may lawfully withhold at pleasure: They are a *debt* on the property of the people, strictly due to the public; a right to refuse them, would be a right to subvert government, which cannot subsist without them. Therefore the same apostle who saith, *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers* †, saith also, *Render to all their dues, tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom* ‖. Taxes are encroachments upon liberty, not by their being imposed upon persons without their own consent, but only by their being such as they ought not to be; only when they are excessive, or when they are grossly unequal, or when there is no security against their becoming such. That the taxes required from the colonies were excessive, either in themselves, or in comparison with those of Britain, has not

† Rom. xiii. 1. ‖ Ver. 7.

been and cannot be pretended; they were palpably the reverse. That the colonies, if taxed by the British parliament, would not have had the very same *degree* of security against oppression, as the other subjects, is readily acknowledged; yet they would have had a very great, perhaps a sufficient degree of security, from the very circumstance which gives us security, their manifold connexions of interest with the members of the legislature; but if this was not deemed a sufficient security, concern for their liberty would have doubtless justified them in making dutiful application for some additional security; every liberal mind would have wished success to their application, and it would have met with success; if it had been obstinately refused, the refusal, in a free state, I scruple not to say, would have justified resistance; for it would have betrayed an intention of abridging the liberty which the constitution allows. But this has never been their demand; it has been declared that this was not what they desired, or would be satisfied with. Their demand has been such as precluded the offer of such security from being made to them. Their *professed* demand has constantly been, that they should not be at all taxed by the

British parliament, but only by their own separate assemblies : and this is a demand truly inconsistent with their being parts of the whole empire ; a demand, the granting of which could scarcely fail to occasion a continual deficiency in the revenue, and would either overburden the rest of the subjects to make up their deficiency, or else put a stop to all the operations of government ; nay it is a demand, though made by the pretended partizans of liberty, which it might easily be proved, by entitling administration to make requisitions from distinct and independent legislatures, would directly tend to enable them, by caressing one, to enslave the whole. But even this demand, unreasonable and pernicious as it is, was only a mask to disguise what they truly and ultimately aimed at, a total immunity from contributing any thing to the general support of the British empire ; an immunity repugnant to the plainest principles of justice, an invasion on the property, and an encroachment on the liberty of all the other subjects.

UNDER the specious *cloke of liberty*, but really in support of so unjust a demand, our deluded brethren have proceeded to conduct which in every

every point of view may be termed *maliciousness*. With liberty in their mouths, they have exercised the cruellest violence, the most oppressive tyranny over all among themselves, who would not co-operate in their designs: *the vilest men* have been *exalted*, and therefore *the wicked* have walked on *every side* §. They have stirred up war: and war is one of the fiercest fiends which the Almighty turneth loose for the punishment of nations by whom he hath been long provoked; the destruction of the human species is the end at which it aims; as soon as it breaks out, thousands become intent on butchering thousands. They have wantonly risen in rebellion, they have excited a civil war: to excite it, except for the most urgent as well as the most important cause, is enormous and complicated guilt. It is the fellest form of war; it sets every man against his brother; it bursts the dearest and the most sacred ties. They have persisted for years in war; many a father, with a bleeding heart, has been dragged from his clinging wife and his tender offspring, to fall in turning the battle from the gate; many a weeping

§ Psal. xii. 8.

mother has seen her darling son, perhaps her only hope, torn from her bosom, to perish by the sword ; the bloody horrors of a field of battle have been renewed and again renewed : *come, behold what desolations have been made in the earth*†. Unnatural children have made these desolations in lifting up their arm against the mother land, who had cherished their infancy, and raised them to high prosperity. They have lifted up their arm against her, in violation of the solemn oaths of allegiance which their own mouths had pronounced in the face of heaven. Not another, but that very generation of men have thus afflicted Britain, in whose defence she had lately wasted millions of her treasures and rivers of her blood ; ungrateful, they have thus afflicted her for having, at this expence, driven from their continent, a nation from whom they were in perpetual danger. This very security which she had dearly purchased for them, they have misemployed against herself. To fill up the measure of their ingratitude, that same nation, in dread of whom they had lived so long, and by whom, for all that them-

† Psal. xlv. 8.

selves could have done, they had been ere now
 enslaved, they have courted to embue her hands
 in the blood of their parent country, by whose
 strenuous and costly efforts alone, but about
 fifteen years ago, their deliverance was wrought.
 By such conduct, the spirit of the nation may well
 be roused: By exposing its accumulated baseness,
 I mean not to exasperate you against their persons;
 most of them have been deluded, many of them
 have mistaken; I mean to excite you to pray
 with the greater earnestness for their repentance,
 to pray, not that they may, by the success of our
 arms, be reduced to slavery,—the generous spirit
 of British liberty, both in our rulers, and in the
 people, reprobates the thought with indignation,
 —but to pray that, by returning to their
 duty, they may be restored to the blessings of the
 freest government under heaven, instead of groan-
 ing for years under the alternate ravages of anarchy
 and tyranny, and in all probability, after a series
 of excruciating convulsions, settling at last in ar-
 bitrary government: I mean to make you feel
 the justice of your country's cause, and to add con-
 fidence and fervour to your prayers for her pros-
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perity and success. Guilty as she may be in many respects, in relation to her colonies she is guiltless; if she be chargeable with any faults on their account, they are so trivial as to vanish when compared with the atrocity of theirs. If in so just a cause, the righteous King of nations deny us success, it must be, either for the accomplishment of some great purpose of his own inscrutable providence, or for the punishment of our sins. Manifold and heinous the sins of this nation doubtless are; and the general spirit of that corruption from which they flow, cannot perhaps be represented in any juster point of view, than that which the text suggests, as we shall briefly unfold under the second head proposed.

II. WE too, brethren, have *used our liberty for a cloke of maliciousness*. Many of the vices which stain our national character, and pollute individuals, spring from our indulging ourselves in what is wrong, under the colour of liberty. The faulty part of the British character, in the present age, cannot be more precisely defined, than by a reigning propensity to libertinism and licentiousness. The leading feature in the prevailing manners of the

the times, is a daring freedom in disdaining all restraints of laws human and divine, and in despising all that order and decorum which compliance with them would establish.

It is the fundamental law of civil society, more ancient than any written law, enacted by God at that moment when he formed man for society, that all the members of the state co-operate for the public good. But in the practice of very many, this fundamental law is even reversed. In the room of affection to the interest and service of their country, they have substituted attachment to a party, and sordid selfish views. When they only perform their duty, by promoting right measures, they must be hired to perform it; and for hire they will promote any measures. I need not labour to expose this spirit of corruption: however many may be actuated by it, all pretend that they detest it. By many again, a spirit of stated, undistinguished opposition to every measure of government, right or wrong, is indulged, avowed, and applauded. It is *maliciousness*; it is inconsistent with integrity, for it is not possible that *every* measure should be wrong. It would pass itself for the
opposite

opposite of corruption ; but it is its twin-brother ; its language is, Let my country perish, if it is not saved by the party to which I have given my name, and in the prevalence of which my interest or my caprice is involved. It calls itself a watchful jealousy for liberty ; but the first opportunity of getting into place proves that it was only unprincipled selfishness and ambition. It pretends to be of great utility as a check against bad designs : but it loses all the power of checking *bad* designs, by being pointed against *every* measure ; it necessarily hinders many *good* designs from being formed ; it obstructs the execution of the best ; if it prevailed, it would stop all the motions of government and annihilate the state ; it renders corruption almost inevitable for avoiding this effect. It diffuses itself through the body of the people ; it produces *mur-murers, complainers, presumptuous, self-willed, factious spirits, despising government, speaking evil of dignities* § ; it vents itself in groundless clamours, little dangerous, it may be, to the public, on account of the obscurity and impotence of those who utter them, but violations of that dutiful behavi-

§ Jude 16. 2 Pet. ii. 10.

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our which religion, as well as sound reason, requires of subjects. In every rank of men, it sometimes fester even into such malignity as to produce partiality against their country.

THE law of God is, *Honour the king; submit yourselves to every ordinance of man, whether it be to the king, as supreme, or unto governours, as unto them that are sent by him* §; *render to all their dues, fear to whom fear is due, honour to whom honour* †. But the spirit of this age spurns all subordination; it indulges itself in vilifying and abusing the best and the most exalted characters; it glories in insolence to all superiours, as the most delicious enjoyment of liberty. Alas! liberty has not a more deadly foe than such licentiousness: its immediate effect is lawless anarchy; its end seldom fails to be slavery.

SUCH instances of behaviour as I have mentioned, we generally consider as purely political; we are very apt to forget that morality and religion have any concern in them: but both have a deep concern in them; all the degrees of dis-

§ 1 Pet. ii. 13, 14, 17. † Rom. xiii. 7.

affection to the interest of our country, and of disrespect to our rulers and superiours, are truly sinful, however they may be cloked; and they are sins which there is a peculiar necessity to mention on this day, as requiring repentance, because, not only by the just judgment of God against them, but also by their own direct operation, they tend to bring on national calamities, and have in an eminent degree contributed to produce, and if persisted in, must continue to aggravate the very calamity which we are now deploring.

BUT these are not the only sins by which God may be provoked to afflict our country; these are not the only kinds of *maliciousness* which we indulge under the disguise of *liberty*. God often punishes sins by other judgments than those which arise directly from their own natural tendency; and among us many sins prevail, which deserve his heaviest judgments. I need not enumerate them minutely; they are too notorious to require it. I need not studiously trace them up to the affection of false liberty, as their source; they are too plainly tinged with the colour of this corrupt fountain.

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THE laws of private justice are of sacred and indispensable obligation ; they are necessary for the very existence of society. The violation of them is so grossly vicious as scarce to be susceptible of palliation, by the most extravagant misconception of liberty. Yet so great is our depravity, that justice is violated with the most unreserved licence. Violations of it, in some of their blackest forms, and the most subversive of the faith of solemn contracts, are frequent and flagrant beyond the example of any former period ; and in all transactions of business, how much do the arts of dishonesty abound ? What injuries are daily perpetrated against the property, the reputation, the peace and quiet, the most valuable rights of men ?

WITH what impetuosity do persons of every station of life, rush madly into every conceivable dissipation ? The gentle ties of decency and propriety are regarded as intolerable fetters, and thrown aside as incompatible with enlargement and freedom of spirit. A levity of manners greatly blameable, a giddy fondness for unceasing amusement, insignificance, enervation of spirit, application to trifles, impatience of reflection, indisposition to serious

serious or severe employment, are chargeable on multitudes who are comparatively innocent. The destructive idleness of gaming is no longer only the asylum of the desperate and the unthinking; very generally in the upper spheres of life, and too generally in the lower, it is painfully pursued as an occupation, its arts are seriously formed into a science, its objects are, with a misemployed ingenuity, surprisingly multiplied. Profusion overleaps all the boundaries of prudence, and exhausts in a moment all the supplies which industry can furnish or honestly permit, and all the resources which princely fortunes can afford. Temperance imposes only wholesome and salutary restrictions: but they gall like shackles; they are burst asunder, and cast away; full scope is given to luxury in all its forms; debauchery revels thro' the land; every pleasure, the most guilty, the most shameful, is eagerly and openly pursued. The holy bands of marriage are contemned; the sacred purity of the marriage bed, as well as the chastity of the blushing virgin, is polluted with a degree of effrontery unknown in other ages. Even the more delicate sex have, in numerous instances, renounced all the modesty of their nature. And all these heinous vices are varnished over, and attempted.

tempted to be justified, by being misnamed liberties. All the passions are indulged till they cannot bear control from principle or conscience.

WE think ourselves free to shake even the throne of God. The liberty of examining every religious principle with impartiality, many abuse into a licence of rejecting all religious principles without examination, and of treating all religion with scurrilous abuse or sneering ridicule. The liberty of every man's worshipping God according to his conscience, many pervert into the privilege of not worshipping him at all, and of scoffing at those who worship him, as the slaves of illiberal superstition. In how many ways is the solemnity of oaths profaned, and their tremendous obligation slighted? A commanding sense of God, habitual piety, fervent devotion, how generally are they wanting? how defective are they in the best?

The land and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved †. Dissoluteness of manners has made an alarming progress. God forbid that these enormous vices should be general in the nation! God

† Psal. lxxv. 3.

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forbid that they should not be ballanced by many virtues! But certainly they are by far too prevalent: and while they continue prevalent, can we wonder if God withhold his blessing from us, even in the justest cause, and notwithstanding the crimes of those who have risen up against us? Success proportioned to the justice of our cause, we have not yet obtained. Let us mourn for the corruption of manners which doubtless has obstructed it; let us pray for a general reformation; let each of us search out his own sins and turn from them. Let us never foolishly affect an exemption from the restraints of any one of God's laws, but act in all things *as the servants of God*, persuaded that his service is perfect liberty, and peace, and happiness.

THE END.